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UNH Anthropologist on Tanzanian Mission To Help 'Street Children'

By [Tracy Manforte](#)
UNH News Bureau

DURHAM, N.H. -- Joe Lugalla has seen the ways of "street children" as they struggle for everyday survival in his native Tanzania. The African region is destitute, and the government has done little to assist its youngest victims, many of whom have been abandoned due to poverty or lost parents due to disease, he explains.

Lugalla, a University of New Hampshire associate professor of anthropology, will spend next semester working with a Tanzanian pediatrician to influence government policy that would improve daily life for these children.

Things that Americans take for granted, such as birth control, condoms to prevent the spread of AIDS, clean water and public toilet facilities are rare commodities in African nations, and even less accessible to already impoverished youths.

To lay the groundwork for their humanitarian effort, Lugalla and co-investigator Dr. Colletta Kibassa, of Tanzania's Ministry of Health, spent last summer collaborating with other Tanzanians to establish the Center for Social Policy, Social Justice, and Health Promotion, also known as AfroCentre.

"Research is not enough," he says. "While we work to understand the problems, we must move to apply the findings. That is the objective of this organization." With continuing support from the Guggenheim Foundation, Lugalla will concentrate his study in Dar-Es-Salaam, the east coast capital of Tanzania, where the city's streets are home to about 40 percent of Tanzania's more than 5,000 abandoned children.

"The government has made no attempt to understand who these children are, where they come from, their reasons for leaving home, how they survive and what problems they face," he writes in the most recent issue of the *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*.

Along with Kibassa, who is also Tanzania's coordinator of Integrated Management of Childhood Illness, Lugalla will ask the questions the government has not. "How do children cope without parents or

homes? What kind of daily hardships and violence do they face? We want to be in a good position to design policy and recommend change," he says.

While Lugalla already knows some of the answers have to do with drugs, prostitution, hunger and illness, he wants to offer policy-makers comprehensive research numbers and anecdotes as told by the children themselves.

In the short-term, he and Kibassa can make a difference by directing the children to free or discounted medical services, for example. But long-term solutions are their ultimate goal.

"I feel a special connection and responsibility because Tanzania is my home," Lugalla continues. "I received most of my education, right up to my master's degree, there, and believe I have something to give back."

He hopes to further the effort next April by organizing an international conference in Dar-Es-Salaam on the health and welfare of street children. This event would bring together other African scholars and researchers from places like Uganda and Kenya. Lugalla has secured partial funding from the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropology, in New York, and has applied for additional support.

"Urban poverty, violence and health problems are widespread among African street children," he says. "We need to share experiences and effect change."

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